

From A to Zen – Exploring the Wisdom of China – Part 4 of 7

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Feng Shui

It is very likely that you will have come across the term Feng Shui at some point, because it has been around for a while and long found its way into non-Chinese cultures. It is however less clear what you associate it with. Perhaps you'll think of a traditional Chinese garden, with impressive round gateways, little arched bridges over streams, a pond with fish in it, spectacular boulders situated within a landscape of winding paths and curiously grown trees. Or you might think of the interior design of a house or an apartment and special rules that apply for how doors and windows should open and where to place furniture, plants and decoration. You could equally think of gadgets such as trinkets, amulets, crystals, mirrors and ideas of harnessing energy and cultivating harmony. And even if you think of something completely different, it is hardly surprising since, in modern times, the term has come to be used in countless ways; from spicing up your sex-life, making you richer, helping you work more efficiently, enabling you to sleep better, bringing more harmony into your home, and making you an altogether healthier and happier person.

As a tradition that, according to some estimates, boasts 8000 years of tradition, Feng Shui has adherents and critics alike, being understood to be, amongst many things, a superstition, a science, an art form, a way of life, esoteric hocus-pocus.

In the history of China, Feng Shui has played an important part because, like Taoism, it is concerned with a profound understanding of the human and the environment. In the words of Professor Stephen Feuchtwang, who has been studying popular religion and politics in China for over 40 years:

To be in the right place facing the right direction doing the right thing at the right time is, then, a cross between being practically efficient and being ritually correct. It is being in tune with the universe.

Feng Shui literally means Wind-Water and as such has a lot to say about the two. In its ancient roots it was probably the means for an agricultural society to survive and thrive through understanding the natural elements and environment: the geographical properties of the land, the cycles of the seasons, the phases of the moon, the energies from the sun and elsewhere. In later times it served to determine ideal spots for dwellings, temples, and burial sites, and then, with increasing population density and urbanisation, to this day, it helps with creating and maintaining a living environment (for example in apartments, houses, and offices) that is in tune with the psyche of the occupants and that makes best use of outside influences such as sunlight, water, air, and noise.

Whenever you hear something about Feng Shui, you will hear about energies in the same breath, known as Qi (or Ch'i). Some people are sceptical about such notions and dismiss them as esoteric mumbo jumbo, not giving them more thought; however, perhaps they deserve consideration.

Some of the fundamental principles of Feng Shui can be easily grasped. They have to do with the course of the sun and the points of the compass. The sun is the primary source of energy for all living beings on earth and as such, extremely important. We don't just need the heat, but also the light of the sun to live. For that reason, South, which is the symbolic Yang, is situated at the top of a traditional Feng Shui compass, and North, the Yin, at the bottom. Houses and entrances ideally face south; in that way they receive ideal Qi.

The orientation is another basic influence for Qi. Not only is the environment marked by a light south and a dark north; no, an important property of the earth is its magnetic field, aligned roughly along the same North-South axis. This magnetism has a significant impact on various forms of life. While in the 1970s biological research showed that certain bacteria swim northward in the northern hemisphere and southward in the southern, in China this had been discovered almost 2000 years ago, perhaps earlier. It was discovered by Wang Chung that certain maggots move along the magnetic lines. From here it intuitive to consider humans to be affected by the earth's magnetic field, too.

Magnetic fields are interesting as they can involve electric currents, another form of energy. In fact, the earth's magnetic field is mostly caused by such currents in the liquid core of the earth.

Scholars researching the roots of geomancy, believe that megalithic or even earlier cultures had knowledge of this kind of energy, also in Europe. Some argue that they made use of this Qi energy at megalithic sites, today known as cairns, dolmen, and stone circles. The intensity of the magnetic fields depends on the ground rock. If there are areas where layers of lesser conductive rock cut through higher conductive rock, they create spots that produce a phenomenon called *conductivity discontinuity*, places where the magnetic fields show anomalies. These could then have been intensified by adding and aligning additional rocks in a certain way. Some experiments where grains were placed in such rock-enhanced sites apparently showed a significant increase in yield from those grains – an increase in some form of vital energy then?

Most of this is obviously quite speculative. However, the aim of rural Feng Shui in finding an ideal place for a dwelling, for example, would have been to find a spot with ideal orientation towards the sun and alignment with local magnetic fields, amongst many other considerations, such as the influence of nearby water courses and natural elevations. An ideal site is known to the Feng Shui master as the "dragon's lair", a place which traps the Qi energy flowing through it and accumulates it without allowing it to go stagnant.

While Qi is commonly understood as energy in English, it is perhaps more aptly translated as “breath of life”. It is what is believed to flow through all forms of life, including earth itself. As the author Stephen Skinner puts it:

Qi acts at every level – on the human level it is the energy flowing through the acupuncture meridians of the body, at the agricultural level it is the force which, if not stagnant, brings fertile crops, and at the climatic level it is the energy carried on the winds and by the waters.

Dragons are heavily symbolic in Feng Shui. In some regards they can be seen as breathing the Qi. They reside in the mountains; they are the water that flows in streams and rivers, and they are the clouds that are formed from the evaporated water. The dragons of the earth, in other words, the mountains and rivers forming a landscape, receive their shape from the falling of the rain which is of course caused by the evaporation and the clouds.

Thus, what in Western terms has been understood in rather mechanistic ways and called the hydrologic cycle, is in the traditional Chinese vision the breath of life, a continuous, life-giving cycle of Qi, sustaining all life, governed over by the Dragon Kings of the mountains.

That these Dragon Kings still play an important role today shows a story I heard here in Dalian. It is a tale about the Shell Museum close to Xing Hai Square. Originally, before the castle was built, the mountain or hill side on that spot extended out quite a bit further, almost until the sea. To make way for the road and other construction, a big chunk of the hill was literally “cut off”. Upon learning of this, a local Feng Shui Master was terrified. They had unknowingly cut off the head of the dragon, he discovered in horror! It couldn't have been worse. He predicted disaster if nothing would be done to counteract this mistake. Fearing bad business and, even worse, negative economic development for the whole area, the city decided to build the castle – as a new head for the dragon.

It is curious: Feng Shui was banned and persecuted during the Cultural Revolution. It was deemed a feudalistic practice and thought to promote superstition. Even in 2006 in Qingdao, the authorities closed down an art gallery which had been converted into a Feng Shui practice. There are even cases of officials being sacked for consulting Feng Shui. But at the same time, students studying architecture in China today usually take courses in Feng Shui.

Dalian's Exhibition Centre at Xing Hai Square is designed around the theme of two dragons playing with one pearl. And there is a certain kind of entrance and exit which, for example, can be found at the northern entrance of the Shopping centre containing the Walmart Supercentre on Xi'an Road; this opens not straight out on to the pavement, but out from the building, and then to the sides – perhaps a remnant of the so-called shadow wall intended to prevent bad Qi or *Sha* from entering directly into a building in traditional Chinese architecture.

Whether you believe in all this or not will naturally make a big difference. But nonetheless, from fairly rock-hard science to aspects that come out on a more subtle and perhaps esoteric level, Feng Shui is a very broad discipline which is alive and being practiced throughout the world today. And if you have any doubts about it, why not try and re-arrange some of your furniture at home to see what effect it has on you.

Did you know?

- If you live in a house, a straight path to your front door is undesirable: try re-laying it with curves.
- Don't have a mirror on a wall opposite your bed as it disturbs your sleep.
- Ceiling fans disperse Qi energy; standing ones are better.
- If the place you live is not situated perfectly according to Feng Shui principles, you can use mirrors to help out: they reflect "secret arrows", in other words Qi.
- A room with too many doors is not desirable, as it is not only draughty, in a literal sense, but is liable to disperse Qi.
- According to some scholars the magnetic compass was originally invented for Feng Shui and was only later used for nautical navigation.